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Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn. By S. E. GONTARSKI. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. xvii + 297 pp.

Beckett's Political Imagination. By EMILIE MORIN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xii + 266 pp.

Murphy, in Beckett's great novel of 1938, escapes physically by scarpering to London to get away from the Dubliners in pursuit, but also inwards towards the radical other space of deep mind. That comic move satirized Revival spiritualism, depth psychology, irrationalism; it convinced the early generation of Beckett scholars, unfortunately, taking him at Murphy's word, that Beckett could have no interest in politics except of the most abstract kind, the Cold War encouraging apolitical readings of a humanist-existentialist Beckett. This is understandable perhaps, given that many of the works feature marginal bodies locked in mental hells or post-mortem states of being, somewhere Languish might imprison poor Parole for ever, divorcing it from all contacts. These two books go a long way towards reminding us, however, that political contexts still count, even or especially with minds in radical isolation: What put them there? What happened to trigger the breakdown in being? What are the cruelties and violence that run the world?

Stan Gontarski has worked on Beckett so long and intimately that he has seen that first generation being transformed by theory and the various turns, the archive yawning open to reveal Beckett's reading, letters, notebooks, drafts. Gontarski turns an immensely knowledgeable gaze on the work, and finds something startling: that Beckett may be more of a bad boy than we thought, identifying with Surrealist iconoclasts, the censored, the morally outrageous and counter-cultural. The book is a collection of various essays which look mostly at the plays and at the new biographical material that the archives are throwing into relief. We are taken carefully

through Beckett's obsessive attachment to the Marquis de Sade, instantiating what Gontarski defines as the decadent turn Beckett studies ought to take, bohemian, internationalist, radical, anti-bourgeois, singing to the tunes of dark modernism that runs from Baudelaire to the Surrealists towards an art daring to speak with the obscene freedom of the Marquis. The best essays in the book give us Beckett's life as an artist at the margins, especially the wonderful long meditation on Beckett's relationship with his American publisher, Barney Rosset, whose free-wheeling daring as a publisher standing up to censorship makes him the ideal 'decadent' companion to Beckett's project. Gontarski's careful unpacking of the *Godot* censorship is useful, sequencing the extraordinary struggle to get a reliable text back to pre-Lord Chamberlain form. Invaluable, too, is the chapter on the trials and vanishing act suffered by Beckett's 'lost' play, *Eleutheria*, even though it was Beckett himself who refused to publish it (it only appearing thanks to the efforts of Rosset and others after his death, a tale told wonderfully by Gontarski) — it is strange to imagine what the world would be like if it and not *Godot* had been chosen as the big play. Roger Blin chose *Godot* because it would be cheaper to stage! It is the professional and theatrical lives Beckett led which are throwing up the real surprises, and, thanks to Gontarski, these new stories are richly fascinating. Thank Godot for Stan Gontarski!

Emilie Morin's great book, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, has many of the Gontarski virtues: it sticks to the detail of the new things we know; it delves into contexts for new perspectives; it refuses to be hidebound by the Beckett of legend. What astounds is the immense labour evident, as Morin explores the different cultural environments of the work with a historian's tenacity and meticulousness. She looks first at the Irish contexts of Beckett's first forays, when he hung out with some pretty scary left-wing Republicans. The book looks at the *École normale* as a political space

and finds the crypto-fascists there, such as Georges Pelorson, who would go on to work for Vichy; it researches Beckett's attempts to work with Eisenstein and other signs of commitments, such as the translation work for Nancy Cunard's *Negro* (1934), revealing a more political Beckett involved in very complex ways in projects much more radical than supposed. With some excellent archival attention to the advocacy Beckett showed (including the famous 'UPTHEREPUBLIC!' of the Spanish Civil War), Morin has a keen research eye for telling detail, and does immaculate work demonstrating the Vichy contexts shaping the siege in the room; Beckett's involvement in the anti-torture work of his French publisher, Jérôme Lindon, during the Algerian War (we cannot read *How It Is* as an apolitical work ever again); and the UNESCO story of Beckett's Mexican translations (although Morin perhaps makes too much of really very minor translation choices here). More close reading of the texts would have helped, but this is a superb monograph that historicizes Beckett so dynamically, with a fine attention to circumstance: it is a model of historical research. Both Gontarski and Morin show us how it ought to be done, in Irish and in French, chasing that elusive devil in the detail of Beckett's long, long life among words.

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